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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SUVA 000067

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TAGS: PREL MARR PHUM ASEC CASC CVIS IO FJ

SUBJECT: FIJI FOREIGN SECRETARY DISCUSSES ROAD MAPS, CHINA, IRAQ, ETC.

REF: A. SUVA 59

1B. SUVA 53 (AND PREVIOUS)

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D).

Summary

11. (C) On Jan. 26, Fiji interim Secretary for Foreign Affairs Mataitoga described to us the interim government's plan for responding to concerns about post-coup human rights and about a road map back to democratic elections, issues bound to be raised by a Pacific Islands Forum Eminent Persons Group (PIF/EPG) that visits Suva next week. He acknowledged the military's future role in Fiji must also be thought through. Mataitoga raised China's influence in the Pacific. When asked, he said Chinese concessional economic assistance is very difficult to obtain. He expressed no knowledge of any requests for new PRC military aid. Mataitoga said the reality is that Australia and New Zealand are Fiji's essential economic partners, thus interim PM Bainimarama has backed away from his threat to "retaliate" against those neighbors for their visa-sanction policies. Mataitoga asked for a softening of the U.S. public announcement on Fiji's security situation. Finally, he asked if a Fiji military interest in participating in MNFI is "still standing." Our comment notes that the situation in Fiji has changed significantly since a year ago when Commodore Bainimarama raised the issue of an Iraq deployment with the Coalition. From the perspective of not rewarding a coup, we prefer not to respond positively. Since other interests are involved, we seek Washington guidance. End summary.

Finding the way back to normalcy for Fiji: PIF/EPG

12. (C) Fiji interim Secretary for Foreign Affairs Isikele Mataitoga sought a meeting with the Ambassador on Jan. 26. He had a lengthy agenda which began with discussion of ways in which Fiji might find its way "back to where we want to be" with the rest of the world, post coup. Mataitoga noted that the PIF/EPG, due to arrive in Suva on Monday, Jan. 29, is to meet with President Iloilo, interim PM Bainimarama, and at least seven interim ministers. In preparation, MFA is working with other ministries to prepare responses to the international-community's list of complaints.

Human rights complaints

13. (C) On human rights abuses, Mataitoga is consulting with interim AG Sayed Khayyum on ways to have military concerns

about "inciteful" speech channeled to the police and courts rather than to the Army barracks. When we noted that, thus far, it appears RFMF leadership, still in control, has not accepted the AG's advice on the topic, Mataitoga moved on.

Elections road map

¶4. (C) On developing a road map to elections, Mataitoga noted reports that the interim government might last 5 years or longer. He believes the length can be shortened; shorter periods from coup to election have been possible in the past.

Still, Fiji will argue that the necessary census (the first in 11 years), the redraft of electoral boundaries, and improvements to electoral systems will take some time. Fiji wants to engage with Australia and New Zealand on resuming assistance for electoral reforms. Mataitoga's aim is for the PIF/EPG process to bless concepts that can then be the basis for an interim Cabinet commitment to a clear time table.

EU discussions, too

¶5. (C) Mataitoga noted that another crucial dialogue will be with the EU. Post-coup discussions mandated by the Cotonou Agreement regarding the EU's aid package, including a major plan for sugar reform, are likely to start in Brussels in late February. The issues of interest to the PIF/EPG are also issues for the EU.

The military's future role?

¶6. (C) We noted that we have no Washington guidance on road maps as yet, but it strikes us another important topic is the military's role in Fiji. It is certainly possible that fair

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elections would bring a return of either an SDL government (deposed by the RFMF in 2006) or an FLP government (deposed with help of elements of the RFMF in 2000). What can be done to encourage the military to return permanently to the barracks? Mataitoga said he has been pondering the question of the military's role and is thinking that, maybe, Fiji's Constitution must include a formal role for the military in the political process.

China's expanding role?

¶7. (C) Mataitoga turned the topic to China, recalling stimulating conversations at an Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies seminar he attended a year and a half ago that raised concerns about China's future role in the Pacific. We noted Bainimarama's announcements that, given Western intransigence on sanctions, Fiji would "look north" to China, India, Indonesia, and Malaysia for both trade and aid. Mataitoga said the trade delegation to China was in the works pre-coup. He indicated no knowledge of any military aid requests. On economic aid, he said China is "getting smarter." He recalled Premier Wen's offer last April of F\$600 million for the Pacific; however, it has turned out the interest-concessionality conditions are extremely tough. Of all Pacific nations, Fiji is the most able fiscally, and even Fiji considers the terms too difficult. Mataitoga mentioned that agriculture-related talks with Indonesia are going ahead in February.

Australia and New Zealand are the reality

¶8. (C) In Mataitoga's practical view, the "reality" is that most of Fiji's trade and investment inevitably must take place with Australia and New Zealand. Thus, Bainimarama's implied threat a few days ago that Fiji would "retaliate" against the Aussies and Kiwis on the trade front in response to the imposition of visa sanctions was a worry. Mataitoga said he and others worked to turn the threat off. (Bainimarama told the media Jan. 25 that he now does not intend to interfere with trade.) The need remains, though, to find ways to work through issues with Australia and New

Zealand, and Mataitoga sees signs of a willingness to "retain dialogue" on a host of working-level issues. He noted a proposal we had been briefed on by the Kiwis (ref B) for bilateral discussions to resolve a continental-shelf boundary dispute. Mataitoga said the meeting may take place in Wellington next month. He hopes that can lead to the Australian and New Zealand travel bans being lifted for such kinds of working-level talks.

The U.S. public announcement

¶ 9. (C) Mataitoga raised the U.S. public announcement to the American public about the security situation in Fiji, saying an American investor in the tourism sector is having trouble obtaining travel insurance to come to Suva to wrap up negotiations on a project. We noted the overriding importance of accurately informing Amcits on safety issues and observed that even the RFMF is still saying publicly that conditions remain unstable.

Visas for ex-RFMF security-firm employees

¶ 10. (C) Mataitoga noted that many ex-RFMF soldiers have joined international security firms. He asked if U.S. visa sanctions because of the coup would affect the ex-soldiers' ability to obtain visas to the U.S.? We responded that final judgments are still pending about the total scope of visa sanctions, but our impression is that ex-RFMF soldiers who departed the Army well before the coup are not likely to be covered by the new visa sanctions.

Any U.S. interest in RFMF participation in MNFI?

¶ 11. (C) Finally, Mataitoga asked if the RFMF's expression of interest in joining the Coalition of the Willing in Iraq is "still standing"? He said, "If so, please let me know." We responded that we do not know the answer since, obviously, circumstances have changed from a year ago when Commodore Bainimarama initially expressed interest. We agreed to pass the inquiry to Washington.

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Comment

¶ 12. (C) Mataitoga is a clever operator who is working closely with his new bosses in the interim government to attempt to normalize Fiji's relations with the Western world ASAP. We seek Washington guidance on how to respond to the Iraq-deployment query. When Bainimarama first raised the issue a year ago, he was just back from a visit to Baghdad, and he wanted his "boys" to have more action than the static-guard functions RFMF troops have been undertaking with UNAMI. The Qarase Government was not inclined to humor Bainimarama, and the query stayed in an "in box." From the perspective of the USG interest in not rewarding a coup, we would prefer not to accept any interim-government expression of interest in joining MNFI. We do recognize other interests are at play, and Washington will have to judge what response, if any, we should provide Mataitoga. Please advise.

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